forward to reading more of what Kānepu‘u and other writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries wrote and to analyzing and publicizing their works in more sophisticated ways.

Further, while it is surely important to continue this work and publish it in English, especially for the majority of our communities who cannot read Hawaiian, the really exciting and radical future of Hawaiian scholarship is unfolding before us now, and it is taking place in the ‘ōlelo kumu o ka ‘āina, the native language of the land. A master’s degree program in Hawaiian language began in Fall 2005 at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Within that program, academic writing in Hawaiian will bloom: all classes will take place in Hawaiian and all papers and theses will be produced in Hawaiian. I expect to have graduate students who will map out political theory as it was articulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and I expect their papers to be published in Hawaiian for future students to learn from. Moreover, we have doctoral students who are writing their dissertations in Hawaiian in the fields of linguistics and political science. This creates another domain of writing in Hawaiian, which will no doubt serve as a springboard for many others. Just as Kānaka ‘Ōiwi have, against all predictions, persevered and multiplied, the same is true of our language. We are making it live again.

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In 1991 Lisette Josephides coined the phrase “the New Melanesian Ethnography” (in “Metaphors, Metathemes, and the Construction of Sociality: A Critique of the New Melanesian Ethnography,” Man 26 [1]: 145–161). It caught on quite quickly and came to stand for a particular strain of Melanesian ethnography, associated most closely with the work of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern, that stressed the differences between Melanesian and Western assumptions about the nature of social life and the world more generally. Both Wagner and Strathern are powerful critics of anthropological practice, and in their theoretical work the status of “Melanesia” as a place and of “difference” as a phenomenon is complex and sometimes shifting. But as the New Melanesian Ethnography developed as a way to write specifically ethnographic works, it became identified
with approaches that asserted that Melanesians created their lives on the basis of kinds of social thinking wholly alien to Western models, and that an anthropology adequate to their experience needed to start with their own kinds of social thinking rather than the Western ones that anthropologists had silently elevated to the level of universal theory. Key terms in the New Melanesian Ethnographic lexicon include “elicitation,” “relationships” (same-sex and cross-sex), “dividuals,” etc. Since many of these terms coalesced into a model that foregrounds the power of performed relationships to create momentarily reified persons and identities through acts of revelatory display and recognition, I have often thought of the New Melanesian Ethnography as a kind of ethno-ethnomethodology—a Melanesia-based model of how identities and, more strongly, people are created in relationships. But even if that reading is idiosyncratic, there is no doubt that what makes the New Melanesian Ethnography distinctive as a way of doing ethnography is its insistence that theory be made out of materials that one finds in the same place one finds one’s data.

In hindsight, the rise of the New Melanesian Ethnography appears to have been a brave, final, and radical stand on the side of cultural difference in the context of an anthropology about to grow tired of detailed expositions of local symbolic worlds in all their particularity. Theories that saw culture and social life as reducible to the everywhere-similar play of power in social life, along with a rapid shift of attention to matters of globalization and modernity, were about to sweep the field. While by no means completely erased from most ethnographic accounts, “difference” became largely ornamental, not the focus of explanation or theoretical elaboration in itself. In the face of this development, the New Melanesian Ethnography has been something of a loyal opposition, keeping anthropology in touch with an important part of its own heritage. And inasmuch as the universalizing moment may now be waning, it is a good time to examine what that approach has accomplished while much of the anthropological world was busy looking elsewhere for theoretical inspiration.

The two books under review provide an excellent opportunity to undertake such an examination. First monographs by two young anthropologists who, working closely with Marilyn Strathern, were thoroughly trained in the New Melanesian Ethnography, these studies provide fine examples of the state of the art. Their successes as monographs point directly to the value of the approach they represent.

The first thing one notices is that the two books are based on research in two very different Melanesian settings, and that these settings presented their authors with somewhat different problems to solve. James Leach worked with Nekgini speakers who live on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, an area widely known for the cargo cults associated with Yali, probably the most famous of cargo movement leaders. The Nekgini took the traditionalist aspect of Yali’s message to heart and reaffirmed their position
as committed practitioners of “custom.” As such, they are precisely the kind of community in which the New Melanesian Ethnography developed. The challenge for Leach is thus to say something new on the basis of the kind of material that has long been grist for this particular paradigmatic mill. Adam Reed, on the face of things, had the tougher assignment, for his research was set in Bomana, Papua New Guinea’s largest prison. With over 700 inmates (primarily, but not exclusively, male) from all over the country, Bomana as a “community” is about as far as one can get from a village or territory inhabited by a single language group. So Reed faced the challenge of making an approach normed on traditional village life work in a radically different setting—though he also had the advantage that almost any way he made the paradigm work was bound to look quite innovative. With this sense of the different tasks their authors faced as background, it is worth examining each book singularly in a bit more detail.

_Creative Land_ is a detailed ethnography of social process among Nekgini speakers. “Process” is an important term of art for Leach, one that, he stresses, does not draw in previously existing entities such as men, women, and land, but instead creates the momentary reifications that let us, and the Nekgini people, see such entities at all. The process he describes is one that in broad outlines is familiar from other work in the New Melanesian Ethnography. It is one in which, put in relatively simple terms, people appear as single entities (gendered persons or groups of single-gendered persons) in exchanges in order to create relationships by detaching parts of other entities (in this case, women who marry in) and thus, in their composite state, produce new people and things that will later themselves form into pure entities that exchange and begin the process again. What is new in Leach’s account is the emphasis Nekgini speakers put on land. His attention to this emphasis makes his ethnography in many ways a powerful development of the paradigm that it in other ways so fully confirms.

Unlike most of those groups studied by New Melanesian Ethnographers, the Nekgini would be described in common anthropological terms as cognatic, tracing connections through both maternal and paternal links. This is an aspect of their lives that makes residence in their case an even more important factor in social identification than it is elsewhere in Papua New Guinea. For Leach, this becomes the basis for an interpretation that sees people and land as co-constructed—as gaining their identities together in the process of forming relations with people/land from elsewhere. It is these people/land units that present themselves as entities in exchange and that find themselves defined in the recognition of other people/land entities with whom they engage. This happens most clearly when people of a hamlet construct a platform full of vegetable food (and a pig) grown on their land with the help of their place-spirits (a platform reckoned as a body), give it to their affines, and then go dance for their affines and (with
the use of love magic) hope to extract from them other wives. Leach suggests, on the basis of an argument too complex to lay out here, that in conducting these ritual exchanges what people are doing is performing their landscape, in the strong sense of creating it through their action, rather than the weak sense of representing it as an absent object. It is only on the basis of performing the land in this way that they can also perform themselves.

This material provides Leach an occasion to deepen the New Melanesian Ethnographic critique of models of kinship based on genealogy. Indeed, Leach goes further than most in suggesting that biogenetic substance passed down from parents forms no part of Nekgini kinship thinking. Instead, shared substance comes from working on, eating from, and performatively producing the same landscape. In order to make this argument stick, he has to wrestle intensely with the Nekgini idiom of kin as those who share “one blood.” Not all readers will be convinced that this refers solely to substance gained from relations to land—but his arguments are thoughtful and should be considered charitably in light of how hard it is to prove an absence (in this case an absence of ideas about substance passed directly from parents to children). The argument as a whole chimes well with recent developments in the New Melanesian Ethnography more generally that are beginning to suggest other cases in which kinship turns out to be “insubstantial” in terms of biogenetic inheritance. As with the argument about the centrality of land to social process, the argument on genealogy is a real addition to the developing tradition of the New Melanesian Ethnography. It should also be said that the book as a whole is consistently stimulating and theoretically sophisticated throughout.

It is one of the founding assumptions of the New Melanesian Ethnography that people in Melanesia are born related to others, and that a major part of social process is devoted to differentiating people from one another so that they can exchange and thus create new kinds of relations (usually those of marriage and affinity). This is the kind of differentiation the Nekgini speakers create with their gifts of food and uses of love magic. Men who find themselves in Bomana Prison, by contrast, have a different set of problems. They find themselves profoundly removed from the relational processes into which they were born. Their differentiation from those to whom they were born related is now so great that they cannot use it as a basis to create further relations. Instead, their primary project vis-à-vis those on the outside is to forget—to forget the relatedness they can no longer develop in performance. In Papua New Guinea’s Last Place, Reed writes poignantly of their need to forget and of the way dreams, visits, and other intrusions of the outside world make forgetting an ultimately impossible project. The book is studded with songs, poems, and dream accounts that make this argument wholly convincing and give the book a human immediacy that does not always mark the work of New Melanesian Ethnographers.
A second task the prisoners in Bomana face is having to make relations with one another where these relations are not on the face of it inherent in the persons as they are, at least in New Melanesian Ethnographic interpretations, in village settings. They do this in large measure by drawing on ideas that frequently underlie male initiations in Papua New Guinea. In New Melanesian Ethnographic accounts, the goal of such initiations is to construct men as single-sex collectivities—men with no connection to women. It is this process of becoming a single-sex unit that allows men to present themselves as an entity able to exchange and draw women from others. Prisoners in Bomana initiate one another by incising their foreskins. In doing so, they discover the kinds of connections “isolation allows” (121), as they develop relations of oneness with people with whom they are “one talk” (wantok), “one street” (wanrot), or “one cell” (wancel), etc. These clan-like groupings then come to oppose themselves to the warders as another clan and thus to continually recreate themselves through versions of the kinds of social processes that animate life outside the prison.

There are many further complexities to Reed’s account—powerful arguments about the nature of time both inside and outside prison, for example, and an interesting discussion of prison conversions as a way of establishing new kinds of relations, ones without precedent in traditional Melanesian social thought. There is also a valuable account of the different ways women prisoners construct their social lives within Bomana. In fact (to adopt a language familiar from the New Melanesian Ethnography itself and central to Reed’s book), recognizing Reed’s work by way of the constraint of the New Melanesian Ethnography does it less justice than it does Leach’s, whose discussion is almost wholly internal to the paradigm. Readers should know that Reed’s book, even as it pushes the New Melanesian Ethnography forward in important ways, will also be of great value to those with little interest in that paradigm—those, that is, who come to it more for what it has to say in more widely familiar terms about issues of criminality and imprisonment in Papua New Guinea and other postcolonial locales.

As evidenced in these books, the New Melanesian Ethnography has the momentum it needs to stand on its own and to continue to develop in the future. As one of the most theoretically coherent positions on the value of difference in anthropological thought, and as perhaps the only position still committed to working out how such difference provides the grounds for uniquely anthropological kinds of critique of Western thought and practice, it remains important for the discipline as a whole. It is good to see it healthy, then, and going from strength to strength. Those who want to peek in on where it is now would do well to start with these two books.

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